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# DE SYMPHONICA VERITATE : THE CASE FOR PLURALISM IN A RELATIVISTIC ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Artikel ini memertimbangkan kembali relativisme moral dalam hubungannya dengan pluralitas kebudayaan dan posisi-posisi filosofis. Mengingat bahwa umumnya Hukum Hume dipakai sebagai dasar epistemologis bagi relativisme, maka pada “*pars destruens*” diajukan kritik atas Hukum Hume yang memperlihatkan bahwa nalar manusia dapat melampaui penginderaan. Relativisme sebagai kondisi dasar bagi masyarakat pluralistik dan demokratis dikritik juga sebagai tidak benar. Sedang pada “*pars construens*” diajukan peran filsafat Katolik dalam dunia 'glokal' kini sebagai ditandai pencarian 'kebenaran publik' warta Kristiani, sejenis bentuk baru “teologi natural (filosofis)”.

**Key Words:**

•*Symphonic* •*Emotivism* •*Hume's Law* •*Axiological Relativism*  
•*Metaphysical Footwork* •*Extra-subjective* •*Absolute Truth* •  
*Public Truth* •*Divine Logos*

Catholic philosophers right now are going through an identity crisis, because they work under no overarching consensus about the first principles of philosophical enquiry. I take it for granted that pluralism can be a bad thing. Conflicts (ideological or otherwise) too are a kind of pluralism. What we definitely need is a reconciled pluralism. This is not to deny, of course, that truth is “symphonic,” as Balthasar puts it in the title of one of his books.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the “sym” of the “sym-phony” presupposes a unitary principle. Otherwise, legitimate theological plurality would not be symphony, but cacophony. Such cacophony, is an expression of what might be called “emotivism.” As Alasdair MacIntyre explains in *After Virtue*, “[e]motivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, some philosophers nurture the conviction, expressed or unexpressed, that philosophical judgments are essentially expressions of incommensurable, prerational commitments that, as such, cannot be impartially evaluated according to universally recognized standards, viz., in the light of a single, overarching principle of understanding. Emotivism thus obscures the reasonableness of the Catholic tradition and thereby hinders the traditional contribution of philosophy to “fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding).”<sup>3</sup>

Of course, sheer pluralism is actually impossible, and the pluralism of contemporary Catholic theology is in reality not quite so diverse as it first appears on the surface. For example, the ever so numerous “contextual theologies” that dominate the Catholic landscape today: feminist theology, black theology, gay theology, liberation theology, ecological theology so on, actually do share a single, unifying principle: the appeal to so called “experience”<sup>4</sup>. In one sense, this reliance on experience is nothing new. The great Catholic tradition has always known this principle, take S. Augustine, to name but one.

The modern appeal to experience, though, in fact continues the Enlightenment project of confining “religion within the limits of reason alone.” The only difference is that they have replaced the objectivist “reason alone” of Kant with a subjectivist “experience alone”<sup>5</sup>.

### **The Position of Moral Relativism<sup>6</sup>**

#### ***A Universal And Rational Criterion for Ethical Systems Is Not Accessible To The Human Mind***

Pluralism of ethical conceptions, philosophical visions of the world, and religious faiths is a fact. In the face of this reality, there are those who maintain that any ethical system is as good as any other, that all ethical systems are the same, that no value is truly universally valid. The fundamental point of pluralism is that these concepts and ethical outlooks are not all the same; rather they are all different. 'Love your neighbor as yourself' is something quite different from the imperative 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. Do we have available to us a rational criterion, one that is valid for all, according to which we can decide which ethics is best? If your answer is no, then you are a relativist (as opposed to 'pluralist').

#### ***Ethical Judgements are Purely Subjective and Relative: “Hume's Law”***

Moral relativism follows “Hume's Law”<sup>7</sup>, which states that “prescriptions cannot be logically derived from descriptions”. All that enters into human consciousness originates in the senses<sup>8</sup>, but the senses afford us only descriptions. Hence, no ethical value originates in the action or in the thing evaluated in itself, but must be projected over it from the subject that perceives and evaluates them. Ethical judgements are thus purely subjective creations. “The choice of supreme values - those values that inform the whole life of individuals and communities - finds its basis, not in science (that ultimately depends on sense perception), but in the conscience of every man and every woman.

#### ***Democratic Society Can Only Be Based on Moral Relativism***

It now follows as a matter of course that there can be no absolute moral value, and he who professes such is an “intolerant”. Life in the open society

(as described by Karl Popper) is ordered by “rules for common existence”, which are “the first and fundamental common good”. “The open society is made precisely of those rules that permit the coexistence of the greatest possible number of ideas and ideals, perhaps even contrasting ones; and it is closed only to the intolerant. And the intolerant person is the one who presumes to know in what the true good consists, to be in possession of that absolute good and he feels it legitimate to impose upon his peers, “perhaps even with the shedding of tears and blood.” Moral relativism and its accompanying “absolute tolerance” appear as necessary conditions for the open society. In a tone of friendly and gentle reproach, Antiseri invites the faithful Catholic to reconsider whether he can be so certain about his absolute values, even suggesting that he might have fallen to the ancient serpent's temptation of possessing godlike knowledge, of “knowing good and evil” (cf. Genesis 3).

***Catholic: Thou Shalt Not Impose Thy Religious Values on Secular Society!***

Does the faithful Catholic's moral convictions derive from a “religious message” or from some philosophical argument? From the gospel or from human reason? Presumably, if his conviction comes from the gospel, then it is fine insofar as it binds his conscience alone. If it comes from philosophical argument, then it is, as we saw before, at most a relative value, and he may not impose it on others. For the Catholic, only God is absolute. Therefore, if he preaches anything that is only human (and therefore only relative) as if it were absolute, then he sets it at the same level of God who alone is absolute, and commits the sin of idolatry.

***Axiological Relativism/nihilism***

According to relativists, moral judgements are not really in the world or in things, but are projected (some say “constructed”) by the individual human person, and therefore are subjective, relative and never absolute, and may never be imposed on another person. In sum, in this conception the world is comparable to a formless clay-like mass. And the human person has a mind abstracted from its material and corporal conditions, that with its “constructions” thrusts values, and ethical codes, and in a word, civilization, into the amorphous and moldable world. The world appears as a demigod's<sup>9</sup> playground, and the demigod (the human person) is at once absolute and

relative: absolute insofar as separated from the world and passing constructive judgements on it; relative insofar as these constructive judgements are of limited extension and can never be universal. The cosmology of an amorphous but moldable world and the anthropology of an abstracted, relative-absolute mind are two foundational tenets of the ideology called relativism.

Relativism tears down preexisting axiological structures, and becomes “a source of tolerance and also opens space for the sacred”. It empowers the person-demigod to construct his own values and meanings in his “playground” that is the world, and requires him to leave room in the playground for the constructions of other demigods. The demigod is even permitted to construct a temple to the Eternal Creator God, so long as he does not claim that his God is the creator of universal and absolute values. This would be a sin against tolerance; and tolerance does appear to be, inexplicably, the one universal and absolute value. “Nihilism is a source of tolerance, above all, because so many presumptions of absolute truth have given rise to intolerance and untold tragedy, piling up millions and millions of dead. Lurking behind every form of totalitarianism is always the fatal presumption of ultimate, definitive truths and exclusive values.”<sup>10</sup> Antiseri furnishes no examples illustrating how genocides follow from the intolerant impositions of universal truths (as opposed to falsehoods), but he does manage to blame metaphysics for them.

### ***Human Ignorance as The Portal to Religion***

Man may not be able to construct his own God or his own eternal paradise, but he can construct his hunger and desire for them, or at least he can construct a rational curiosity about them. Let him take comfort in this who can. Science restricts its assertions to descriptions about the world. “Philosophies”, on the other hand, transgress, asserting prescriptions with the absoluteness permitted only to descriptions, and daring to extend them to universal scope. Antiseri marches before us the pageant of the principal ideologies (he writes “philosophies”) of the twentieth century, and according to him, these attack God, not because they are false, but because they are universal and prescriptive. The real enemy of religion is the human reason.

**Pars Destruens: Confutation of Moral Relativism**

There is a natural ordering in things of universal scope that the human mind can know and should respect. The ordering is really in the thing: the human mind does not construct and project value into anything, but only recognizes it already present. In Catholic philosophical tradition, the human knowledge of this ordering is called natural law. Our knowledge of its reality does not depend on Catholic religious authority though this confirms it. Therefore, it evokes the respect of everyone: Jews, Buddhists, atheists, terrorists and “Catholic moral relativists”.

***The Real Epistemological Power of The Human Intellect***

We consider the human person (“the subject”) who perceives through his senses a thing (the object of perception). What can legitimately be concluded from the fact that the subject (S) can and does perceive an object (O)? Hume can see no more than O's description internally represented, even as Descartes can infer from the internal representation no more than his own existence (*cogito ergo sum*). Hume and Descartes represent in the history of philosophy a concatenation of epistemological reductions. What is really there? In the first place, we know that S is not O and O is not S. The subject is not reducible to the object, for if he were, he would be an elephant when he thinks an elephant and would annihilate himself when he conceived the notion of nothingness. Furthermore, O is not reducible to S. Even if the object is something entirely fantastic, as when the subject imagines a unicorn, the unicorn is not the chimera, it is not nothingness. It has an ephemeral consistency that is not absolutely nothing. Should there be any doubt about this, tell the empiricist that he is wrong, and he will no doubt reject this, proving that the notion “empiricism is false” is not the same as the contradicting notion that “empiricism is true”, and therefore that the objects of thought are not reducible to nothingness. Therefore, the object is being, that is, “effective presence”, however tenuous. Now if the object were absolutely identical to the subject ( $O = S$ ), the subject would destroy himself upon contemplating things that are not himself. Thus far, we can infer from the act of perception or cognition that

- (1) S and O are different; and that thinking would be impossible if S and O were not different; in other words,
- (2) The difference between S and O is a necessary condition for thinking.

Are S and O absolutely different? Is S so different from O that it has absolutely no point of commonality with it, and vice versa? We give the term “absolute” all its value. If there existed some third reality M that had a relation with S and another relation with O, then S and O would not be absolutely different because they would have M in common. Therefore, S and O could be absolutely different only if each were sealed within its own universe, having nothing in common with the other. This is absurd, S and O are not absolutely different, and therefore, they have something in common. This discussion treats of S and O in the context of the cognitive relation, but this result is more general. No two realities can be absolutely different: if they were, each would be in solipsism, in its own private universe having nothing to do with the other. If realities in this universe were so isolated from one another, the universe itself would be annihilated. We can add two more conclusions to our considerations on the cognitive scope of perception.

(3) It is metaphysically impossible for S and O to be absolutely different.

By “a thing is metaphysically impossible”, we mean that were such a thing to be given in reality, universal annihilation would ensue. From (3) It follows that

(4) S and O are the same or identical (which does not mean “absolutely the same”, as in “ $A = A$ ”).

(5) The sameness of S and O is a necessary condition

(5a) for existence and

(5b) for thinking: for existence because absolute difference would split the universe into absolutely disjoint pieces; for thinking because absolute difference in the cognitive relation would likewise destroy it.

Putting (1) [S and O are different] and (4) [S and O are the same] together, we say that S and O are in metaphysical opposition. Now we must make the pertinent metaphysical induction. We do this by asking what gives origin to the sameness between S and O? Suppose the sameness derived entirely from S: then even O's difference from S would derive from S, and the difference between S and O would vanish, contradicting the fact that O is necessarily different from S (1). Hence it is impossible that the sameness between S and O derive entirely from S. And by similar reasoning, it is impossible that it derive entirely from O. Yet it must exist by (3). Perforce, we must conclude that

(6) The sameness between S and O does not derive entirely either from S or from O. Hence,

(7) The sameness between S and O is independent of (“transcends”) both

S and O. This last conclusion is the metaphysical induction: the affirmation of a preexisting reality that is the necessary condition for the metaphysical opposition between S and O, and therefore, the necessary condition for the cognitive act and the reality of the difference between S and O.

The attentive reader perhaps has observed that this conclusion puts into crisis the notion that man is a mind abstracted from its material and corporeal conditions that judges absolutely concerning the world, “constructing” the values it wants. Why? Because the thought of the subject is not absolute but conditioned by this sameness between S and O, which derives from neither and therefore is independent of both. Therefore, an absolute mind cannot possibly exist. If an absolute thought were to exist, it would have to absorb this independent sameness into the subject (to eliminate its dependence on this sameness), and this would destroy the difference between subject and object, and by (2), would imply the destruction of thought itself.

We return to our consideration of what certain knowledge is derivable from the act of human cognition. Conclusion (7) is argued in the context of the cognitive relation between S and O, but there is nothing in it to restrict its validity to realities in such relations. In brief, if “X” and “Y” represent any two finite realities, then they cannot be absolutely different (entailing universal annihilation in a manner analogous to 3) so they must be the same; and this sameness cannot derive from X alone or Y alone (which would eliminate their difference), so it must be independent of both for these to coexist in metaphysical opposition. Hence, we can strengthen (7) to conclude that

- (8) The preexistence of a common sameness between any two finite realities is an absolutely necessary condition for their metaphysical opposition.

Our actual universe is filled with many finite realities and many metaphysical oppositions between them. Let “X” again represent a finite reality. X thus enters into myriad metaphysical oppositions in which it is different from all the other finite realities, but not absolutely different; it is the same as each of the others too, so there must preexist a common sameness between X and each finite reality. Since X is common to all the metaphysical oppositions, all these oppositions cannot be absolutely different among themselves but must also enjoy some sameness (otherwise the finite unity of X would contradictorily be disintegrated in absolutely different pieces). We conclude that



- (9) There preexists a universal commonness that is a necessary condition for each and all the metaphysical oppositions among finite things. Since it is a necessary condition for the “totality” of our universe of finite realities, we call it the Totality. If there were two Totalities, then by (8), there would have to preexist a “higher” common sameness by which the two could be in opposition. This higher commonness would then be the Totality, and we would still have only one Totality. We conclude that
- (10) The Totality is unique and that we are justified in speaking of “the Totality”. We also affirm that
- (11) The Totality is extrinsically infinite: if the Totality were limited by another extrinsic reality, it would imply the preexistence of a higher common sameness that would be the true Totality, contradicting the Totality's uniqueness. We could also argue that the Totality is intensive, penetrating into all finite realities, so that none of these can delimit it, but this anticipates the introduction of the notion of dynamism, to be developed in another context. Finally, we affirm that
- (12) The Totality is intrinsically finite: the finite realities dependent on it for their existence articulate it from within. This intrinsic articulation is an internal limitation which we denote as “intrinsic finitude”. In sum, the Totality is intrinsically finite and extrinsically infinite.

Based on (9), the fact that the Totality is the preexistent universal commonness necessary for the metaphysical opposition between finite things, and as such is irreducible to any one of them, it follows that the Totality is in metaphysical opposition with each and every finite reality: it is the same as they and different from them. This calls for an ulterior metaphysical induction to resolve the opposition. By a reasoning similar to that justifying conclusions (6) and (7), the sameness between the Totality and a finite reality is not reducible either to the Totality or to any one of the finite things, so that this sameness must be independent of both the Totality and each finite thing. Thus, we metaphysically induce the necessary preexistence of an ulterior reality. This ulterior reality is extrinsically infinite: were it extrinsically finite, it would be finite and incapable of resolving the opposition between itself and the Totality, and certainly incapable of resolving the opposition between any other finite thing and the Totality. This ulterior reality is also intrinsically infinite: were it intrinsically finite, it would repeat the structure of the Totality contradicting its uniqueness (10). We call this ulterior reality “ $\infty o$ ” (“Alpha-Omega”), and conclude that

- (13)  $\infty o$  is intrinsically and extrinsically infinite, or more simply, “absolutely infinite”. Since it is absolutely infinite,
- (14)  $\infty o$  is unique, for the existence of a repetition would limit it, contradicting its infinitude. Furthermore, its intrinsic infinitude (absolute simplicity) implies that it does not parcel out its existence to the realities that participate in it (as the Totality does):
- (15)  $\infty o$  coincides with all existence and
- (16) The existence of finite realities including the Totality are entirely within  $\infty o$ . This coincidence of  $\infty o$  with existence (15) (to be understood in the strong sense that  $\infty o = \text{existence}$ ) is eternity: we say that
- (17)  $\infty o$  is eternal, which can also be designated as the impossibility of  $\infty o$ 's not existing. From (16), that  $\infty o$  is the existence of each and every other existent, we have that  $\infty o$  is not different (in existence) from any other reality. Hence, it is not in metaphysical opposition with any other reality, and there are no further metaphysical inductions to be made:
- (18)  $\infty o$  is the ultimate reality.  $\infty o$  is God.<sup>11</sup>

The whole point of this exercise is not to develop a new metaphysics in five minutes. This metaphysics has in fact been developed over hundreds of years, and some of its elements are laid out here compactly and over simplified with a view to make the skeptical empiricist doubt his certitude regarding his constitutive ignorance.

The point is that a sound philosophical foundation for a non-relativistic Pluralism entails no less than such metaphysical footwork. In other words, Catholic philosophy must be of a “truly metaphysical range”<sup>12</sup>, if it is to escape the Babylonian captivity of modern skepticism.

This is also the position of biblical revelation. St. Paul writes: “For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God himself has made it plain to them. Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and divinity - how ever invisible - have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made. That is why such people are without excuse: they knew God and yet they refused to honor him as God or to thank him; instead, they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened. The more they called themselves philosophers, the more stupid they grew [emoranthesan], until they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a worthless imitation, for the image of mortal man, of birds, of quadrupeds and reptiles” (Romans 1:19 - 23). Then St. Paul proceeds to connect this failure to recognize God with immoral actions, confirming our

position overturning moral relativism, but from a religious perspective.

***Moral Relativism Destroys Democratic Society: The Recovery of Good and Truth***

It is absurd to consider tolerance an absolute value, it would be the end of the free society. One wonders if it is necessary to tolerate the intolerant. Is it legitimate to defend oneself from the intolerance of the criminal intent on robbing one's livelihood, on killing one's family, even at the cost of being intolerant of the criminal's intent? By what right can a court of law impose the punishment of imprisonment on intolerant criminals when clearly such an act would be intolerant of their criminality and of their contempt for the law of a nation? How can the relativist impose tolerance on all the rest of us without violating his own principle of absolute tolerance?<sup>13</sup>

To solve this riddle one must recover the notion of the "good" and the notion of "absolute truth". It is emphatically false that "metaphysics" causes genocides and wars. A metaphysics that discovers and affirms the existence of a universal good rather encourages men to seek it and to harmonize their common pursuit of it. To the contrary, it is rather the denial of the infinite and of the absolute good that leads to genocides and wars. It is relativism, and any ideology that denies the necessary preexistence of the infinite, that leads to precisely such horrors. The notion of the good is in continuity with philosophical tradition: God and the Totality, as good, thrust good things into existence (realizing the sense of "good" as *effusivum sui*, as in Plato) and draw them toward themselves (realizing the sense of "good" as final cause, as in Aristotle).

The notion of truth also is transformed with the affirmation of the infinite. Without the infinite, there can be no more than "your truth" or "my truth". Since, in the absence of the infinite, reality is conceived as the sum of finite things, so that what is inside one thing or person (for example, my way of thinking) does not necessarily have anything to do with what is in another (your way of thinking). But dialogue is based on a common truth which referees those who dialogue.

"Did you pay the bill?" "Yes, check the receipt." If the bill for your coffee was 562 rupees, there is no way you can get around the fact that only a certain amount can satisfy the conditions for truthfulness of a statement like "bill paid". If the question is "How much was your bill?", the only true

answer must be “562 rupees” (nothing less, nothing more). This is true under all suns and at all times. It is a universal truth.

The receipt is an extra-subjective registration of a financial transaction; it is not merely “objective”, for as purely objective, it would be trapped inside a third reality and be inaccessible to the two persons. Dialogue and truth requires an infinite and common third that transcends the two persons in dialogue and which therefore can force each person to respect it (as the necessary condition for their relating; of course, this third is the Totality and God). But Relativists generally deny the infinite, and circumscribe truth within the finite realities of the subjects and object, rendering truth necessarily contingent, finite and therefore partial. However, with the affirmation of the infinite, truth need no longer be partial, it can expand and take roots in the infinite, and itself can become “infinite”, that is, universal and absolute. Far from enslaving the person, absolute truth is a window that opens onto the infinite good, and furnishes the person's intellect wings to fly beyond his own narrow subjectivity. Only Truth makes us free and democratic.

Many are the promoters of “tolerance” as a virtue both civic and Christian, but if it is taken as an absolute it can become an excuse for not authentically loving the good, for not promoting it, for not being generous, for not demanding goodness, generosity and honesty in ourselves and in others. Thus, even indifference has been dressed up as “tolerance” and even as Christian charity, no less! But true Christianity is first in the doing good and in shunning evil, authentic tolerance follows upon them. Christian charity cannot be diluted to the mere tolerance of others; and an authentically open society is composed of people in common pursuit of a mission: the ardent, enthusiastic, alacritous pursuit of the good. Mere tolerance is too weak to unite a society of vibrant, healthy, free human wills energized with hope.

### **PARS CONSTRUENS: The Gospel as Public Truth**

How can we present the truth about Jesus to a world that rejects all truth claims as arbitrary? Can we find ways to engage in meaningful conversation without appearing arrogant or manipulative? Can we witness to the Gospel without simply enlisting in the ongoing “culture wars”?

These are the questions we are facing in this so-called post-modern

epoch. To answer them we need to step back and think deeply.

“The designation of Christ as Logos in John points to the fact that the Evangelist thinks of him as occupying the place of the (Greek-Philonic) world-reason through which all things become intelligible. The sequel of the Gospel shows, however, that he does not aim to demonstrate this by projecting the life of Jesus onto the plane of Greek wisdom (or vice versa), but through the self-interpretation of the very Logos who has appeared in the flesh. This happens insofar as the Logos makes himself known as “gracious love” (charis), and therein as “glory” (the “beauty proper to God,” doxa) -- and precisely thus as “truth” [aletheia]: Jn 1:14). In this way, a kind of intelligibility becomes possible whose light raises the pure facticity of the historical to the level of necessity.”<sup>14</sup>

This passage from *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe* claims that divine Logos is more than just a principle for interpreting the Christian Creed, more than just the in-house “jargon” we in the Christian community use when we speak *entre nous*. It claims, over and above this, that divine Logos occupies the “place of (Greek-Philonic) world-reason” itself. Balthasar can advance this claim because he knows that the Jesus story has been made the Reality that holds sway throughout all the realms of being -- and so has become the principle that keeps the world together as a meaningful whole and guarantees that it can be interpreted meaningfully in the first place (see Col 1:17: “all things hold together [synesteken] in him”). By the same token, the Christian experience concerns the whole of being, and so forces, by its very nature, fresh thinking about everything: motion, reason, personal agency, causality, technology, war and peace -- all in the light of the new logos of being:

“Only a philosophy of free love can justify our existence, but it cannot do so unless at the same time it exegetes the essence of finite being in terms of love. In terms of love and not, in the end, of consciousness, or spirit, or knowledge, or power, or pleasure, or utility, but of all these things only insofar as they are modes of, or first steps towards, the one act that really fulfills them, the act which shines forth superabundantly in the sign of God. And beyond existence as such and the constitution of essence as such the constitution of being as such comes to light, in the sense that it “is” in no way other than by “not clinging to itself,” in expropriating itself of itself, into finite concretion. At the same time, finite essences can

in turn receive and grasp being as it is in itself only if they do not try to protect themselves, but are trained by being in the love that gives away: consciousness, and the possession of oneself and of being, grow only and precisely in the measure that one increasingly breaks out of one's being by and for oneself into communication, exchange, sympathy with humanity and with the cosmos.”<sup>15</sup>

Note the connection Balthasar makes in this passage between the structure of the Thomistic real distinction between *esse* and essence, on the one hand, and christological love, on the other. In order to understand this connection, we can recall a key text in which Thomas Aquinas, speaking of *esse*, says that it is “something complete and simple, but not subsistent”.<sup>16</sup>

These lengthy quotations are meant to show, through Balthasar, a way to correspond with the Catholic Tradition about the challenges facing Christians in the postmodern epoch. Like us, Augustine and Aquinas faced questions such as what to proclaim to a fragmenting world, and what to say when truths previously held to be universal are under assault from a disorienting religious pluralism. We need not look upon the postmodern challenge as completely unprecedented. Rather, we must continually renew our relationship with our intellectual ancestors.<sup>17</sup>

Like Balthasar we should strive to combine

- 1) *The greatest fidelity* to tradition bringing out treasures new and old from the heritage handed down to us (the expressions of the tradition are not just monumental fossils, but living vehicles through which the core of the message flows authoritatively here and now);
- 2) With *the greatest freedom*: the interpreter not only sees the core of the tradition through its concrete expressions, but, so to say, *with* them, in the same direction, in the same spirit in which they took shape, and so is free to draw creatively (creative fidelity) from them avoiding any fundamentalistic slavery to the letter.

Of course, in emphasizing the Christian gospel as the truth that calls for radical conversion, we would run against the prevailing subjectivism and skepticism in our societies regarding the possibility of knowing ultimate truth. Asian societies that have undergone “modernization”, just like in the West, tend to regard the world's religions as agencies for the cultivation of privately held religious opinions – agencies that can be studied with the tools of sociology, psychology, and other secular disciplines.

But the Catholic church is not simply an agency that stands for good personal values. The Church has the mission of “speaking the Truth to Caesar”. The Gospel is a statement of extra-subjective, historical truth, and all other modes of thought are to be evaluated in the light of the Gospel truth.<sup>18</sup>

It is probably almost inevitable that Christians, who do not live in a separate enclave but are part of society, should come to see the Church no longer as the bearer of the truth by which all human beings must live, but a voluntary association in which individual believers might freely join themselves to develop and express their faith. There are, of course, certain advantages in this situation as compared with the situation of the Church in Christendom, when the power of the state could, and often did, condition the Church into submission to worldly interests.

Yet the proper stance of the Church is inseparable from its obligation to declare the sovereignty of Christ over every sphere of human life without exception. Take, e.g. the contemporary ideology of the free market. Here we have, as so many times in history, an example of something good being corrupted. It has become clear that free markets are the most efficient way of continuously balancing supply and demand. But it is also clear that when the free market is made into an absolute (in spite of all relativists!), outside of rational control in the light of ethical principles, it becomes a power that enslaves people. The free market is a good servant but a bad master. Now it is not the business of the Church to make political programmes or engage in political alliances, but it is clear that she must affirm the truth of the Gospel, the fact of the sovereignty of Christ as sole Lord and Saviour, and must do so in season and out of season, whether it is followed or refused.

For this to be effective it is absolutely vital that Christian intellectuals have the courage to speak out, with no inferiority complex, in the public arena. In order to do so, though, with a fair amount of self-confidence they would need to learn a new type of “natural (philosophical) theology”, one that in the contemporary world could probably be more aptly called “public theology”.

**End Notes:**

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Die Wahrheit ist symphonisch. Aspekte des christlichen Pluralismus* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1972); Eng. tr., *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).
2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 12 (emphasis in the original). “[N]ulla enim multitudo est quae non participet uno, quia omnia multa sunt unum secundum aliquid” (There's no multiplicity that does not participate in unity, because all manifolds are one according to something). Thomas Aquinas, *In De divinis nominibus*, cap. 13. 2.
3. One would want to check the Heideggerian concept of “Erfahrung”.
4. According to Adrian J. Walker, “[c]ontextual theologies are merely the latest offspring of Liberal Protestantism, distinguished from their stodgy ancestor only by the attitudes of 1968. Like much of multiculturalism, current American Catholic theological pluralism turns out to be merely the same old liberal monism decked out in colorful funky costumes.” (A.J. Walker, *Hans Urs von Balthasar as a Master of Theological Renewal*, *Communio* 32 (Fall 2005), 519).
5. Antiseri D., *Relativismo, nichilismo, individualismo*, Rubettino Editore, 2005. See also: “Mere Tolerance. An answer to Antiseri's proposal of moral relativism” by “Melisso” ([www.chiesa.espressonline.it](http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it)).
6. David Hume {1740}. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III.
7. Also S. Thomas Aquinas would agree thus far, but his conclusions are totally different.
8. Cf. the Demiurgos of late antiquity. The Demiurgos was a Being dwelling in spheres of lofty spirituality, in a world devoid of every element of that material existence with which in the Bible story the humanity created by God is naturally associated.
9. Una spia a servizio dell'Altissimo di Dario Antiseri
10. (see: [www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=41533](http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=41533))
11. I have borrowed and adapted this part from “Melisso” (with all probability a modern avatar of Melissus of Samos), see footnote 6 above.
12. John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 83.
13. “1.4 Consistent with respect for human rights, the practice of tolerance does not mean toleration of social injustice or the abandonment or weakening of one's convictions. It means that one is



free to adhere to one's own convictions and accepts that others adhere to theirs.” (Declaration of Principles on Tolerance. Proclaimed and signed by the Member States of UNESCO on 16 November 1995)

14. Balthasar, *Glaubhaft ist nur Liebe*, 35 (Eng., 39-40).
15. 19Ibid., 95 (Eng., 144).
16. A.J. Walker, op. cit. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*, I, 1, ad 1. See (1)~(18) above.
17. Cf. C. Chang, *Engaging Unbelief. A Captivating Strategy from Augustine & Aquinas*, InterVarsity Press, 2000. Curtis Chang is a young Taiwanese doing missionary work at Tufts, MIT and Harvard.
18. L. Newbigin, *Truth to Tell. The Gospel as Public Truth*. Eerdmans/WCC Publications Geneva, 1991. Newbigin is of the opinion that the proof of public truth “is in my willingness to publish it and to test it in all relevant situations”. Moreover “[w]e do not validate this claim by calling to our aid some philosophical system based on other grounds. There no more reliable grounds than what are given to us in God's revelation. The proper answer to the charge of subjectivity is world mission, but it is world mission not as proselytism but as exegesis” (p. 33). Personally I tend to think that, in a Catholic perspective, it is possible and necessary to develop a proper philosophy, as has been shown in the medieval Renaissance.

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